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"Re-membering the Clichés: Memory and Stereotypes in Baraka's *The Slave,* Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* and Hansberry's *Les Blancs*"

Cindy Gabrielle (University of Liège, Belgium)

Abstract

These days authors who use stereotypical characters such as the African woman warrior or the old field slave smoking his pipe and humming blues songs would probably be considered as intellectually biased or mentally colonized. Yet, for some African American writers like Amiri Baraka, Charles Fuller and Lorraine Hansberry, these characters represent a link between Black people and their past or, to use Pierre Nora's term, they are *lieux de mémoire.* This is why these authors oppose the more or less general attitude which consists in dismissing these clichéd-figures from the field of representation, for this would amount to erasing an entire segment of African American history. Going against the trend of the time, these playwrights thus give a voice to those silenced by normative history and, to decolonize symbols which after all belong to the past of Black people, Baraka in *The Slave* (1964), Fuller in *A Soldier's Play* (1981) and Hansberry in *Les Blancs* (1966) also invest these characters with a new significance.

> Whatever I am or seem [...] to you, then, let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right. Figure, still, that you might be lying...to save yourself. (Baraka, 1974: 813)

In their seminal work on *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994), Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally argue that the "interaction between history and memory," as well as the "interplay between the personal and the collective" (1994: 7), result in the creation of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. Coined by the French historian Pierre Nora, the term conveys the process through which,

> whether deliberately or not, individual or group memory selects certain landmarks of the past – places, artworks, dates; persons, public or private, well-known or obscure, real or imagined – and invest them with symbolic and political significance. (1994: 7)

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Geneviève Fabre, Robert O'Meally and the other contributors to the book have each chosen a *lieu de mémoire* which they examine from different perspectives: i.e., theoretical, ideological or even autobiographical. Their aim, however, is common: broadly speaking, it consists in determining how sites of memory – because they, for example,. "challenge the false generalizations in exclusionary 'History'" (1994: 8) – impact on African-American identity and culture. Following the example of those scholars, I shall discuss the presence of *lieux de mémoire* in three plays by African-American writers, Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* (1964), Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981) and Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* (1966) in which sites of memory are approached in especially dynamic fashion. What the three plays have in common is their attempt to shed a positive light on sites of memory that were negatively constructed by Whites but sometimes, perhaps by extension, also by generations of Black people.

At first, it might seem paradoxical that authors who clearly strive to "describe black people in a new way, to destroy all the stereotypical ideas about black people" (Savran 1988: 75), should resort to clichéd representations of blackness in their plays. *Les Blancs* opens, for example, with the description of a black woman warrior who is "majestic and motionless" (1972: 41). The first character the reader comes across in *The Slave* is an old field slave smoking his pipe and humming blues tunes. As for *A Soldier's Play*, the pace of the narrative is set by the characters' recollection of C.J. Memphis' song and music. Persecuted by his sergeant for corresponding to typical "Southern niggahs" (1974: 521) or "geechies"[1] (1974: 523) "playin' cottonpicker singin' the blues, bowin' and scrapin – smilin' in everydody's face" (1974: 533), C.J. came to consider death as his only escape and committed suicide; his music, however, still haunts his companions long after his death.[2] Interestingly, the old field slave in Baraka's play seems to be aware of the fact that he *is* stereotypical (the words quoted above are his own). Yet, he also states that "the very Tightness [of some ideas] stinks a lotta times" (1974: 813) and, surely, this can be read as a hint that it would be a mistake to dismiss characters such as the old field slave, the woman warrior and the geechy as being mere cliché-figures, for this would blind one to the fact that they have other functions in the narratives. It will become apparent in the course of this article that these characters represent *lieux de mémoire*, links between Black people and their past, and are used as such by three playwrights who clearly consider that constructing Black identity in a new way will only prove possible if the past is preserved and, whenever necessary, shaped in a new way.

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1. The Woman Warrior and the Old Field Slave

First published in 1966, *Les Blancs* foregrounds the colliding of colonial, post-colonial and liberalist discourses in a mythic African country called Zatembe. When Tshembe Matoseh, a Black African who has settled in Europe, returns to his home country, Zatembe, to attend his father's funeral, he finds himself in the midst of a violent struggle aimed at driving out the white settlers. His community urges him to take part in the revolution, yet he hesitates for, as Margaret B. Wilkerson says, he wonders if "the years of suffering torture, indignities and enslavement at the hands of white settlers justify the brutal murder of men, and 'innocent' women and children" (1994: 19). However, there comes a moment when Tshembe cannot shy away from his responsibilities anymore. As his first revolutionary act must necessarily be the murder of his own brother, a Catholic priest who has adopted European values and betrayed his own kin, the decision to fight the settlers proves to be an excruciating one for Tshembe.

From the sounds of the African bush to the description of the black woman warrior, the prologue to *Les Blancs* fits the mental image some of us may entertain of Africa – or so it seems at first. It is however quite significant that one of the first sounds the audience should hear (according to the stage directions) is the laughter of a hyena, for the story of Mondigo makes it clear that this particular animal represents the colonized. The legend has it that, one day, the elephants claimed they needed more space on account of their bigness and, while Mondigo – the wise hyena who could not reach a decision – "thought. And thought. And thought" (1972: 95), the elephants drove the hyenas out of their own territory. "That is why the hyena laughs until this day and why it is such terrible laughter: because it was such a bitter joke that was played upon them while they 'reasoned'" (1972: 95).[3] What is more, the author specifies that the drums the public is made to hear should "not at all [be] the traditional 'movie drums'" (1972: 41). In view of this, it becomes quite clear that if Hansberry appears to rehearse old clichés concerning Africans, it is to better deconstruct them. If, as Nora says, a *lieu de mémoire* is the "embodiment of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (1994:289), then Africa *is* a site of memory for African-Americans. Consequently, Hansberry's attempt to qualify the normative vision of Africa can be seen to testify to a wish on her part to transform an important *lieu de mémoire* for the descent of African slaves into something worth entering African-American consciousness.

It can be shown that the description of the woman was composed in the same vein as that of Africa. In this respect, it is important to note that the similarities between Hansberry and Joseph Conrad in their depictions of the war queen are striking. This is not to say that

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Hansberry is paying any homage to Conrad here; rather, she tries to reinterpret another important *lieu de mémoire* for African-Americans. To understand how Hansberry counters Conrad's view by introducing in her play a subtle shift in emphasis, it is necessary to quote the passage in which Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* (first published in 1902), ponders "the apparition" of the woman, whom he sees from the safety of his steamer:

> She walked in measured steps [...] treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and a flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow [...]; bizarre things, charms, gifts, of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (1921: 77)

One of the major differences between the two versions is that, according to Johanna M. Smith, "although Marlow notes that her hair is shaped like a helmet and that she wears leggings and gauntlets, he dismisses these martial signs as 'charms' that have meaning only as proto-ivory" (1996: 175). By contrast, what Hansberry emphasizes in the prologue of *Les Blancs* is the martial character of the woman (rather than her charms): her painted cheeks, her "dance of the warriors" is accompanied by "mounting drumbeats" and by the "unearthly" laughter of the hyena (1972: 41). In *Heart of Darkness*, the danger the savage woman represents is further controlled by a process of silencing: "she does not speak in [Marlow's] narrative" (1996: 174). Even though the woman warrior also fails to speak in *Les Blancs*, it could be claimed that her silence is redeemed by a rich body language: to give only one example, when Tshembe claims that what is happening in Zatembe is not his business anymore, it is said that she "drops and writhes in agony" (1972: 81) – a gesture which mirrors the fate awaiting Black people if nothing is done, and if people like Tshembe refuse to take responsibilities.[4]

When Ngago, the poet-warrior, addresses his brothers and sisters, exhorting them to rebel, it is specified in the stage directions that he should move "with a dancer's grace, almost hypnotically, circling the stage" (119). Similarly, when the woman first appears to Tshembe, she also begins to dance "slowly, hypnotically, relentlessly [...]. She circles in movements symbolic of the life of the people, binding [Tshembe] closer" (80-81). In this context, it becomes apparent that Ngago is a kind of avatar of the woman warrior, but one who evolves

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in the *real* world (as opposed to the war queen who only appears to Tshembe).[5] It is also worth pointing out that, each time Ngago appears in the narrative (act 1, scene 1 and act 2 scene 6), he is accompanied by a young woman who, as it happens, is a warrior too. Besides, she and the woman of the prologue are both called 'THE WOMAN' – which is not to say that Ngago's companion and the war queen are one and the same character. What is perhaps implied here is that the former too is one of the latter's avatars. That the woman warrior is embodied in these 'real' characters is crucial because then it becomes impossible to deny her importance as a site of memory by classifying her as a mere stereotype: if the cliché is dismissed, the reality it represents (the roots of Black people) is erased as well.[6] These characters, the woman's avatars, remain rather inconspicuous in *Les Blancs*, but less so in *The Slave* since the embodiment of Black consciousness (of the old field slave) is here no less than the major character of the play.

Baraka's second major play, *The Slave* (produced and published in 1964), is concerned with Walker Vessels' attempts to embrace his new identity as a leader of a Black rebellion by outgrowing his old identity as a Black intellectual enslaved to white values. To do so, he arranges a last confrontation with his white ex-wife, Grace, and his former university teacher, Bradford Easley, who is now Grace's new husband. When Walker reveals at last that he has also come to take away the two daughters he had with Grace before his troops assault the city, Easley attacks him but he is shot by Walker. Soon afterwards, the army shelling hits the house and Grace is badly wounded. Before dying, she asks Walker to take care of the girls (who had been sleeping upstairs), a request to which Walker responds by shouting "they're dead, Grace! [...] They are dead" (1976: 825). Walker's last outburst is however contradicted as "in the sudden aggravated silence, [...] there is a child heard crying and screaming as loud as it can" (825). Whether this means that the girls are alive or that Walker succeeded in being reborn as a Black man is left for the reader to decide.

It should be noted that, when Walker leaves what remains of the house, he becomes "the old man at the beginning of the play" (825) – i.e. the old field slave, for this can be seen as an indication that the main character is the embodiment of Black consciousness. In that connection, Kimberly W. Benston interestingly argues that Walker

> is a renegade behind the mask, a man at the crossroad, who represents both the consequences of what Baraka calls in *Blues People* the 'slave mentality' [...] and the transcendent alternative of rebel heroism [...] shaped in the role of a contemporary black revolutionary leader. (1976: 174).

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Thus, Walker is a *lieu de mémoire* because he is at the same time an individual located in a specific time and place *and* a symbol of the past of African-Americans. But he is also much more than that, as is apparent when he exclaims that he is "crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals" (821). Here, Walker is definitely the spokesman of the entire Black community. That Walker is an extension of the old field slave further indicates that slavery has persisted even after its abolition: the text indeed suggests that Black people (here, Walker) are still being mentally colonized by White values.[7] But why is it that, even though Walker has succeeded in getting rid of the white component of his identity, he is, when the play ends, the old man of the beginning again? In fact, this is in keeping with the old field slave's statement that "times a dead thing really" (813). The old man is himself present in the past (when slavery existed), in the present (when he introduces himself to the audience) and in the future (when he is Walker) so that it becomes almost impossible to locate him *exclusively* in the past. Besides he is, on his own admission, "much older than he looks...or maybe much younger" (813). It is possible that the blurring of time divisions which is foregrounded in the play epitomizes the author's endeavour to counter the erasure of the past, and this recuperative stance is – as I will argue – also one of the values underpinning Charles Fullers *A Soldier's Play.*

2. "The Madness of Race"

As *A Soldier's Play* opens, Sergeant Waters, "a well-built, light-brown-skinned man" (1994: 504), is far too drunk to stand on his feet. As he keeps mumbling to himself that "they'll still hate you" (1994: 504), a man creeps out of the shadow and fires his gun twice, killing Sergeant Waters on the spot. Set in 1944 at Fort Neal in Louisiana, Fuller's drama – which was first produced in 1981 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 – recounts Captain Davenport's efforts to investigate the murder. Contrary to what he perhaps first expected, Davenport eventually comes to discover that the murder of Waters is not an act of racism but has been triggered off by the tensions inside the Black community. Indeed, Sergeant Waters has not been killed by a White but by one of his own men, Private First Class Melvin Peterson, with the complicity of Private Tony Smalls.

In *A Soldier's Play*, the tension between forgetfulness on the one hand and memory retrieval on the other hand finds a counterpart in the clash between Waters and C.J. but also between Davenport, whose role is indeed to dig up the past, and the other soldiers. All the soldiers want to forget about Waters' death and when Smalls protests – he presumably feels

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guilty – he is told to "go turn on a smoke machine"[8] (1994: 508), to which Smalls responds by lying down on his bed (the discussion takes place in the soldiers' barrack), "his face in the pillow" (1994: 508). Although this is far from explicit, it is on no account a coincidence that Davenport should be introduced in the play right after this particular moment and that one of the very first things he should do is clean his glasses. What this device underlines is the contrast between the soldiers who refuse to face the truth (and rather bury their faces in their pillows) and Davenport who will remain clear-sighted throughout the entire play. It is perhaps important to note, in this connection, that both the play and the film (A *Soldier's Story*, based on the play) clearly associate blindness with internal violence. The most obvious example is when the soldiers are training with their smoke machine (in the film), they almost kill Davenport. Further, the play seems to sustain the view that Waters' death cannot simply be erased from the picture, as some of the soldiers wish, because it shows that the lines of fracture are not always between Blacks and Whites: sometimes these lines of fracture are *internal*. The best way to heal the soldiers' blindness for the internal violence ravaging their community is then to follow Davenport's example and go back to the past. Since internal violence is linked to what he calls "the madness of race in America" (1994: 550), cleaning the smoke also means exploring what lies at the source of identity problems in the Black community.

In the three plays, the past persists "as hard as nails" (1974: 814) and arguably C.J.'s music is functional in that it serves to counter Waters' endeavour to erase of a whole dimension of African-American history. If one keeps in mind that the story is told retrospectively by Davenport, then the fact that the play closes with C.J.'s song "Don't Sit under the Apple Tree" (1994: 551) could be seen as an indication that, a long time after the events, the music is still very much alive in Davenport's mind. But Davenport never actually heard the song since he and C.J. never met (C.J. committed suicide before Davenport's arrival), and this perhaps indicates that his music symbolizes something else. To Waters, C.J. is a "geechy" (1994: 537), an "ignorant Negro" (1994: 545) and, up to a certain point, he is right in this since C.J. is uneducated and quite superstitious. To give only one example, when Peterson prepares to fight an unofficial duel with Waters, C.J. advises Peterson to use some Farmer dust, which he carries in a pouch on his neck, for he believes that "jes' a pinch'll make [Peterson] strong as a bull" (1994: 524). What is more, his subservient attitude to Waters makes him look like, as Waters puts it, the "Southern niggahs, yessahin, bowin' and scrapin', scratchin' your heads" (1994: 521). One should not conclude from this that C.J. is a coward: he does not respond to Waters' provocations because he knows that words do not hurt if they

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are ignored; "callin' names ain't nothin, I know what I is" (1994: 524). Another element showing C.J.'s intuitive intelligence is that he is perhaps the only one who understands Waters *and* feels compassion for him, for he senses that a man who "ain't sure where he belongs must be in a whole lotta pain" (1994: 524). But what is important to remember here is that C.J. represents, even in Waters' eyes, some kind of continuity with "the old days" (1994: 537), when Blacks were still "out pickin' cotton" (1994: 537). Thus, inasmuch as the *milieux de mémoire*, the real environment of memory (Nora, 1994: 284) which they symbolize, no longer exist, this amounts to saying that both C.J. and his music are sites of memory. As Nora explains, *lieux de mémoire* indeed occur

> where memory crystallizes and secretes itself [...] at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (1994: 284)

On a symbolic level, C.J.'s death then signifies the denial of an important segment of African American history at the very beginning of this emerging tradition.

Clearly, C.J. represents a type of blackness which belongs to the past and which has been (and perhaps still was at the time of the play) stigmatized and made fun of by Whites. As a result, Waters feels that the Black community will only achieve respectability if the continuity between Black people and this 'negative' past is disrupted. The problem for Waters is that even if he tries very hard to behave properly (according to white standards), it is still his skin colour that people consider first. His very name further suggests that he is an 'in-between' character: there is no ground on which he can stand since he has been rejected by both sides. The place where Waters should die also seems significant since, in the play, Waters' body is found "in the woods out by the Junction" (1994: 505), which surely hints at the symbolic dead end from which Waters never escaped. Confronted with the dilemma of race, a choice between two paths, Waters, as it were, trod the wrong one (he tried to become white but found it impossible to do so), and went back on his tracks only to find that he could no longer gain access to the other path of the junction.[9] Even if Davenport corresponds to the utopian Black Waters promotes – Davenport is indeed educated enough to "challenge [the white man] in his arena" (1994: 516) – I want to argue that he has come to terms with the cultural schizophrenia that some Blacks, like Waters for example, suffered from. As pointed

out earlier, Davenport still 'hears' C.J.'s song and music a good while after the event, which is a clue that – unlike Waters – Davenport accepts and preserves his Black heritage, however much it has been stigmatized by Whites. The past (C.J.) survives by being remembered by Davenport but perhaps also by those who danced "the C.J. [...] in Tynin Saloons during 1945" (1994: 550). In view of all this, it becomes apparent that Davenport, who is able to move in white society while preserving his blackness, has integrated both the black and the white components in his identity. In a sense, Davenport has found at the junction a path which Waters had never seen and, in this, he represents for the Black community a touchstone for an alternative construction of identity.

3. Conclusion

In the course of this article, it has become apparent that the three playwrights share a common vision of the past. In their plays, remembering the past indeed is an asset when it comes to understanding the present and anticipating the future. In this connection, Christopher Bigsby interestingly argues:

> That sense of redeeming the past through the present, of giving voice, through present being, to those silenced by time, is strong in the black writer, more especially since the dead were silenced – socially, economically, politically, culturally – when in life. (1992: 266)

What is more, the past also has a role to play in the characters' self-definition as a kind of safeguard against total or (in Walker's case) partial assimilation. The past of Black people is so problematic that preserving any continuity with it is no doubt very difficult. The everyday tragedy of many African-Americans is that they are, as it were, 'trapped' in the derogatory vision that Whites had of Blacks at the time of slavery and after its abolition. To reconstruct a new identity away from these stereotypes, the first impulse – Dixon's recommendation and Waters' politics – is to get rid of them. However, in the three plays, these stereotypical representations of blackness are clearly presented as *lieux de mémoire.* Dismissing the clichés is then tantamount to erasing the reality they represent: i.e., the heritage of Black people. This is not to say that stereotypes can be made to represent the Black community: if the authors recuperate these clichés, it is of course with a view to investing them with a new significance. In *A Soldier's Play*, C.J. is depicted as someone who, presumably because of the environment in which he has been brought up, has come to act like a typical geechy, but at the same time

he is also a talented blues singer, a sensitive and compassionate man, and a naturally intelligent one despite his lack of education. From a contemporary point of view, the woman warrior in the prologue of *Les Blancs* is a kind of exotic and biased representation of Africa or of African women. On the other hand, when she is compared to Conrad's savage woman, she becomes much more ambivalent: the savage woman whose dangerousness is ignored by the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* becomes in *Les Blancs* the spirit of war leading her people to revolution. In other words, it might be a mistake to consider that Black people remember their past through clichés that have crystallized into negative *lieux de mémoire*. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally indeed note that "certain sites of memory [are] sometimes constructed by one generation in one way and reinterpreted by another" (1994: 8), and this points to the fact that, however stereotypical they may be, *lieux de mémoire* have a potential for transformation. This potential has been called upon by Amiri Baraka, Charles Fuller and Lorraine Hansberry who, by decentring them in their respective plays, have thus transformed clichés into something that yields a more complex vision of reality.

Notes

1. Geechy is the name given in American South to a country person of African-American descent.

2. Sergeant Waters (a light-skinned Black) is convinced that uneducated Blacks like C.J. "bring [Black people] down" (537). Indeed he claims that "if it wasn't for [them], white folks wouldn' think we were all fools" (521), and Blacks would be accepted as equals amongst Whites.

3. According to Steven R. Carter, the source of the tale of Mondigo is probably "the satirical fable of the man, the elephant, and the animal Commission of Inquiry in Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt. Kenya*" (1991: 106).

4. Carter argues in this connection that Tshembe resembles Hamlet insofar as "both Hamlet and Tshembe take a long time to perform their duties and several innocent and not so innocent people die because these young intellectuals have such great difficulties determining what their commitments are and how they should perform them" (1988: 28).

5. Through Ngago, the woman warrior *has* a voice.

6. In this, I tend to disagree with Dixon who claims that the importance of memory in Black poetry or prose only becomes visible "if we overlook the most glaring cliché of the African warrior o my beautiful black woman' poetry of the sixties" (1994: 23). Of course, I am not claiming that women often fought in Africa or that poet-warriors really existed. However,

since they are given equal footing as Tshembe, they should be treated as such.

7. Mental colonization occurs when the (formerly) colonized internalize the ideologies of the colonizers. The old field slave is very much aware of the insidiousness of mental colonization hence his anguish concerning the origin of some ideas and his subsequent rejection of those that stem from the colonizers: is this idea "[y]ours? The other's? Mine? [...] No, no more. Not my own" (813).

8. The task of this particular unit is to create smoke to blind the enemy.

9. In the movie, he is found *near* a bridge which perhaps emphasizes his inability to lay bridges across chasms.

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